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TURKEY-IN-THE-STRAW

By MacKinlay Kantor

Diversey

El Goes South

The Jaybird

Long Remember

Turkey in the Straw: A Book of
American Ballads and Primitive Verse

MACKINLAY KANTOR

TURKEY
IN
THE
STRAW



*A Book of American Ballads
and Primitive Verse*



DECORATIONS BY WILL CRAWFORD

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1935

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To
VIRGINIA *and* J. NEWTON

¶ THE material included in this volume was published in various newspapers and magazines during the period from 1924 to 1934, inclusive. The more recently published verses appeared in F.P.A.'s Conning Tower, in the New York *Herald-Tribune*. Others appeared in the Line O' Type Column of the *Chicago Tribune*, conducted by R.H.L., and in *Voices*, the *Des Moines Register and Tribune*, *Elks Magazine*, *The Midland*, *Outdoor America*, *Adventure*, *Overland Monthly*, the *New York Times*, *American Poetry Magazine*, the *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, and the *Chicago Daily News*. The author and publishers wish to express their debt to the editors of the above publications

*

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I
,
DREAMS OF AN OLD WAR



TURKEY-IN-THE-STRAW

Judge Wright said,
"It's contrary to law.
They shouldn't be playin'
Turkey-in-the-straw!"

But all the old vets
In the Potters' field
Mumbled and laughed
As our bad hands wheeled
Through the powdered smoke,
The muttering stammer—
Talking so fierce
In 'Sixty-one grammar!

And Perc Knowles nodded
In his deep grave:
"The best martial tune
Those boys ever gave."

And Park Banks stirred
In his old blue coat,
Close by the field
Of budding oat—
"The boys are beating.
I hear—I see. . . .
Next tune they play'll be
'Jefferson and Liberty.' "

Clatter-patter,
Clatter-patter,
Crowds went by
And they only saw
A mild May sky
With us standing under it,
Beating like hell
A maudlin chorus the graves knew well.

Joe Mead whispered
Up through the sod,
"Hope they play 'Tallewan'
Too, by God!
Hope their fingers
Are wire and steel;
Hope they make
The cedar trees kneel."

And unseen eagles
Yelled on a ridge
Over beyond the Deer Creek bridge.

Clatter-clack-clack.
The crowds went past. . . .
We were tired
And done, at last.
But the cedars whistled
That dancing sound
In the slow night breeze
Of the burying-ground.

And some say the little flags
Snapped like stars
To the drum, drum, drum
Of those redskin bars;
And I saw Yankee men
Pushing up their stones,
And dancing to our fifes
On splinter-new bones!

JEFFERSON'S HILLS

Jefferson Callan went to the war
One day when the corn was green.
He carried a saber in his hand. . . .
Grandmother knows. She seen.

She seen him flutter along the road
Like a wild hawk on the wing;
And over the hill by Davy's Mill
She heard him sing.

And Captain Beal came by, came by
In the autumn when oaks were red:
"Jeff was brave, and don't you cry. . . .
Poor Jeff is dead."

They seen him fall at Bridal Spring
With one leg off at the knee;
He died with his saber wet with blood,
Over in Tennessee.

Only at night he galloped back.
(Darling, the stars were drumming!)
People said that they heard him call,
"Gen'ral, I am coming."

Grandpap opened the cabin door:
Nothing but whip-poor-wills. . . .
"O, they cry in the brush tonight!
These were poor Jeff's hills."

And then *he* came in a swish of wind;
The glare of his eyes was green.
He had the cavalry out with him. . . .
Grandmother knows. *She seen.*

SONG SUNG BY JOHN KEARNS

The surgeons said that I could not live,
But I gladly gave them the lie;
So they carried me under a yellow tent
And waited for me to die.

Major Sherman stood by my bed. . . .
How the oak leaves shone on his collar!
He guarded my legs from the hungry knives,
Though the holes were large as a dollar.

Five gaunt months. Then I rose and walked:
O, the autumn winds blew through me!
My parents said that a stranger came—
And only old Shepherd knew me.

I limped on those wounds for sixty years
In the calm of my grocery store,
And judges and slaves and tattered saints
Passed through the wide green door;

These were my gifts: a sunlit seat,
And a haunted drum-skin lay
Played by the sweet Grand Army men
On the thirtieth day of May.

My grandchild loves my shuffling step
And the empty sleeve of me;
I love the badge which sings my pride
In the Thirteenth Infantry.

I know I will find a bird-swept park
Where the goldenrod still burgeons. . . .
I'll walk through blue battalion ranks
On wounds that laughed at the surgeons!

THE TWENTY-NINTH OF MAY

Tomorrow, "The Jaybird" would clatter and cry
Like the echo of cannister cleaving the sky. . . .
And he knew that thin hands with their stiffness and pain
Would prod the bull-drums to a battered refrain.
Ah, boot-toes were bright, and the faded eyes glared
Up at heaven.

Tomorrow, my music is blared.

Blue elves, army elves in a frenzy of age
Tore the grace-notes from bars on a rheumatic page. . . .
O, pin me my ribbons and fetch me my drums.
I'm ninety years old, and my fingers are thumbs.
And it's "Hell on the Wabash" or "Kellogg's Q.S."
I'm the last of my line—and the bravest, I guess.

"He's sleepin'," They murmured. "Let's git him away."
And, Jesus! They guided him into a day
Where the burnt banners brushed him as lips of the gods.
The *Seventh Wisconsin!* Up, up through the sods
They were springing like birds in the haunt of a dream.

Still linger the eagles. Tomorrow, they scream.

THE FIRST MINNESOTA AT GETTYSBURG

(July 2, 1863)

Sickles was yielding on the left,
Birney sagged at the middle,
Sykes was still on the long, hard road;
The lines were a flaming riddle.
Hancock sat on his tall black horse;
Barksdale lay in his blood—
And a column sprang from the western ridge
Like a butternut-colored flood.

Minnesota stood in her place,
Weighted with sweaty blue
(They looked like a spindly skirmish line—
Two hundred and sixty-two).
There wasn't a squad to spare from the left,
There wasn't a file from the right,
And the dun stream poured from the western crest
In a bitter and howling blight.

Hancock raced on his tall black horse,
He rode like a frenzied mother
To lift his children out of the sea
That choked with a snarling smother.
He wheeled and looked to the north and south;
No time to find any more. . . .
Two hundred and sixty-two in blue. . . .
The gray tide came with a roar.

A yowling torrent of bayonets,
A spasm of rosy flags,
A full brigade at the double-quick,
Hairy men in their rags;
Their cry went up as a heathen yell,
They hurdled across the dead. . . .
Hancock turned on his spectral horse.
"All right, Minnesota," he said.

Two hundred and sixty-two, they leaped
Like birds from the spotted boulders,
An Indian screech on their aching lips,
Their rifles up at their shoulders.
Two thousand of Wright's men watched them come—
The smoke slid down in a shroud.
Hancock sat on his quaking horse
And stared at the stinking cloud.

Then he rode hell-bent for the corps of Sykes.
Reserves! rang his horse's feet.
And minies gashed from the valley rim
In a whispering, whining sheet.
Minnesota was lost in the ruck
Of the shuddering grain laid bare.
(And Winfield Hancock's face was white
Because he had sent them there).

Sickles was drooping on the left,
Caldwell broke in the middle.
And Sykes' men came at a fevered run
(The fields were a foaming riddle).

Are they through? they muttered with dripping jaws,
Two thousand fellows in gray?
The line, the line! Have the rebs got through?
The thick smoke drifted away.

Two hundred and sixty-two in blue
Holding the battle row:
They lay like Minnesota logs
In a forest of leaden snow.
Reserves came down in a gaping rush
To grasp at the threatened ground,
To plug the hole in the Union side—
But never a hole was found.

Thirty-seven in Federal blue,
Springfields kicking their shoulders. . . .
Their brothers flat in a silent row,
Kissing the steel-pocked bowlders.
The butternut tide went reeling back
To the green, green ridge behind,
And General Hancock stared at the gap
Where the wet, wet dead were lined.

Sickles had yielded on the left;
Humphreys bent to the wall;
The copper sun went down, went down
Under a sulphur pall.
And thirty-seven men in blue
Came back from the smoking glare
Where Wright expected to drive a hole.
But never a hole was there.

APPOMATTOX

(April 9, 1865)

In April sun the dead march played
Without a drum to beat it.
A flag of truce was then arrayed,
And Lee went out to meet it.

All gray and braided was his vest,
Steel gray the heart inside him;
He turned his back against the west
Where Sheridan defied him.

And, *How-de-do* . . . in April time
Spring tore her flowered packet. . . .
Grant looked as if without a dime,
And wore a private's jacket.

The gauntlets touched, and someone coughed,
And one put on his glasses—
The bugles trilled like hawks aloft
Beyond the trampled grasses—

"Horses and mules to be retained:
They'll need them for their plowing,"
The pens declared. The door was gained.
The victors all were bowing.

A hundred, hundred months have passed. . . .
O, don't you cry, Susannah!
And Lee upon the steps stood fast,
Nor heard the North's hosanna.

He looked to where his army lay
Through all the warming weather.
He stood without a word to say,
And struck his hands together.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AT GETTYSBURG

(November 19, 1863)

*The cars brought him from Hanover across the sodden hills;
He wore a hat of rusty black; he stopped at Mr. Wills'.
The bugles blew in bricky streets as in July they blew,
But many tramped the roadway then, and now were only few.*

*And photographs were taken, and the speech of Everett
Resounded in its opulence, and fallen leaves were wet.
Beyond the road to Taneytown the fences all were scattered:
And still the rotting mules around, and still the
meadows tattered.*

I was a woman of the town. I stood within the crowd
And saw his ugly height arise; his treble was not loud.
I tried to think about the Flag, and how the graves
were lined. . . .
My little girl kept saying, "Ma!" and I kept saying, "Mind!"

Six inches under chestnut soil my skeleton was near.
I'd worked a gun for Huntington, I was a cannoneer.
I tried to listen to the speech with ghoulish, sad
contortion. . .
Ah, "We have come," the tall man said, "to dedicate a
portion."

A sergeant I, named Ryerson, the Sixty-ninth P.V.;
I died beside the rocky copse a quarter after three.
July the third was long before, and so was all of life—
What care the dead for Presidents? I thought about my wife.

Another horror under mud, in mouldy butternut,
I heard the words. He had a way of pausing after "but."
I yelled from out my awful bed, my bones with worms
enraptured,
"I stopped a dozen Spencer balls, and still I was not
captured!"

And oh, we two, we blue and gray, by war so sorely used:
We'd wrestled tight. A Whitworth bolt came down, and we
were fused.
He spoke of us, though we could not rise up and line the
street. . .
A clavicle for apple trees, a vertebra for wheat.

*And so Abe Lincoln broke his heart, and so the people
heard—
The living in their wool and lace, the dead who never stirred.
His months were only seventeen until an actor shot him,
And he became a hoary myth. But no one has forgot him.*

I was a dog of Gettysburg. I trotted near the train
And nosed among the officers who kicked me to my pain.
A man came by . . . I could not see. I howled. The light
was dim,
But when I brushed against his legs, I liked the smell of him.

HALLOWED BE THY NAME

My grandfather fought in Tennessee.
My grandfather fought at Aldie.
He strode in the fours of the infantry.
He rode on a horse named Baldy.
His coat was bluer than indigo.
It was gray as the Spanish mosses.
Four long years in the dust or snow,
He counted his nation's losses.

He was six feet tall on his blistered feet.
He was six feet tall in his boots.
He's felt the sting of the Yankee sleet,
And the lead that the rebel shoots.
Only a boy with a hot, brown eye
When he galloped to Chancellorsville.
He was seventeen, and his pulse was high,
At the battle of Malvern Hill.

"We'll need you, Billy, upon the farm. . . ."
But he shaped for a Lincoln soldier.
He held the basin for Stonewall's arm
When they took it off at the shoulder.
A view-halloo in the star-lit arch:
It was Nathan Forrest raiding!
And long he dreamed of the Georgia march
With Sherman's bugles fading.

In purple shoddy, in rebel rags
My grandfather lived to sire me,
And ever the thought of his battle-flags
And his battered trumpets will fire me.
His body was buried in Vicksburg loam
Before the slaves were free. . . .
*He died in the Richmond soldiers' home
In nineteen-thirty-three.*

Still in the night, his music whines:
The fifes, and the banjos playing.
I dream of Adirondack pines,
And the warm palmetto's swaying.
The Union drums roar down the years—
Please God, they beat them well!
*When "Dixie" screams to him who hears
I'll give the rebel yell.*

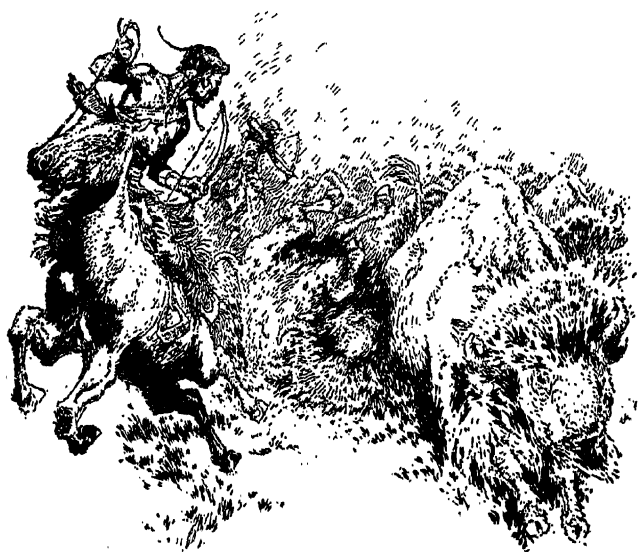
Dear Dick Ewell, and Meade so chill,
And Stuart whose name was Beauty—
Old Joe Hooker, and A. P. Hill,
And Reynolds who died on duty—
Ever they form in the smoky clouds
And ever the ranks attend them. . . .
The laggards march with their frosty shrouds,
As the children they sired send them,

Wrapped in the banner which names a song,
Wrapped in St. Andrew's crosses. . . .
The volley they fired was four years long,
And ever we count the losses.
There are ghosts in the northern lilac-veil,
There are ghosts in the sweet-gum tree—
God teach those ghosts to tell the tale
That my grandfather told to me!



II

COME, MY TAN-FACED CHILDREN



THE BLACK BISON

Thunder-drub in the midnight stars,
Blacker than earth, and watery wild;
Poured in an arrowy tidal wave
Over the bars of the border gate,
Thunder-drub in the pushing rain!

Calf and ancient,
Mothy and torn,
Thunder-drub to the bursting morn—
Scream in joy like a maddened child!
Cream of an ebony cauldron's hate
Boiling up from the Yellowjack,
Boiling the Blackfeet over and back.
Late—oh, late in a sodden drum—
Hoof on hoof and mane in mane
They rattle and thrum, they rumble and come!

Horned and woolly
Along the peaks,
Stumbling out in the sunset paint
To roar and tumble and die in the creeks;
And lift the buzzards' slathering beaks
In a joyful taint by a bushy wallow.
Over the years of ripening grass—
Bones in a hollow, bones in a hollow.

Rattle and pound and thunder-drub
In a bearded ocean of sires and sons,
Drub in the wake of the smoking guns,
In a forest of bristling Pawnee spears!
Drown at last in a sea of dirt
And a puddle of hairy, steaming tears.
Thunder to heaven and back again,
Thunder on mountain, rumble on plain,
Up to the white fields' bony grass.

Shaggy and dusty,
Bruise . . . beat . . . pass. . .

SIMON KENTON

"He was still the owner of many large mountain tracts...but he was 'land poor,' in its fullest sense, and these were forfeited by taxes.

Kenton became so worn out, and so distressed by poverty, that in 1824, when nearly seventy years old, he rode to Frankfort, while the legislature was in session, to petition that body to release these comparatively worthless lands from the claims upon them."

—EDWARD SYLVESTER ELLIS

His coat was torn like holly,
His pain of hunger old.
Along the rutted cart-ways
His shadow shone like gold—

Thin gold that's beaten, aged
At hidden forges' flame....
His name was Simon Kenton
But no one knew his name.

And yet against horizons
He listened for a sound—
The ghosts of yelling tawnies
Come back to Bloody Ground.

And no one called him beggar,
For if his coat was torn
His blue eye stared forever
As if it held a thorn.

In Frankfort town he halted:
The quaking horse stood still.
"Where are the legislators
Who weigh our good or ill?"

Then ran a sudden whisper
Like arrows in the sky.
And men hung back a-watching
As he went riding by,

As he went, old and lonely,
Up to the lawyers' hall;
The crowds came staring, shoving.
He saw them not at all.

The crowds began to chirrup,
Began to yell and bray.
He did not call them, "Brothers,"
Or order them away

But kept his elder silence
That clung to him like rags.
They whispered in his shadow,
"You've ridden better nags.

"You've heard the turkey gobble
Of painted Shawanese.
And felt the torture fire
About your blistered knees.

“The catamount and war-whoop—
You knew their chilling sound.
With many chiefs you’ve measured
The Dark and Bloody Ground.”

And “There goes Simon Kenton!”
The cry rose brisk and strong
As up the hollow hallways
The pauper crept along.

And “Here comes Simon Kenton!”
It caught the pricking ears
Of dour legislators
Through “levies” and “arrears.”

Then came the soldier, Fletcher,
To lead him to a chair;
The lawyers genuflected
To see him sitting there.

And all day long the people
Swarmed up to shake his hand,
And all day long the pauper
Forgot about his land.

He dreamed of old, mad rivers
A-rush by thin stockades,
And feathered, screaming Girties
A-padding on their raids.

He dreamed: "I watch you judges
Come past to see my face. . . .
And I forget my taxes,
And I recall a place—

"That you will never reckon.
Please God, I sniff them still:
The deer-fat in the fire,
The panther on the hill."

Then, in the early evening
He groped from out his seat
And made a way to travel
Through all the shuffled feet.

Alone he found the stairway
And waved the people back;
Alone he climbed his saddle
And started down the track.

A million miles of alders
He had, as in a deed.
He owned the dewy blue-grass
And all the hills he'd need. . . .

(The panther in the thicket)
His eyes no longer dim,
Ignored the legislature
And what it did to him.

POOR JOHN THOMAS

John Thomas Brewer is lost in the woods—

Hooahoooh. It's a lonely sound.

Dark are the leaves and dead is the sun,

Grinning and callow, the poplars stand. . . .

John Thomas Brewer, he has no gun.

(High in an elm he has wound his belt,

Bloody and raw, and the gray wolves smelt

Him and his scared dog lashed to the tree.)

Oaks are black, and the prairie a sea,

And all of the cold bats shrink in their hoods. . . .

John Thomas Brewer is lost in the woods.

Chasing from dark and chasing from dawn

Over the rattled and icy track,

The gaunt legs creep and the thin tongues fawn—

Hooahoooh. It's a lonely sound.

Poor John Thomas, lashed to the tree,

Dreading the day when the wolves can see,

High in the pitch, thirty feet from the ground—

Listens in sweat to the yelling pack.

What though a road will cleave the brush,

Rapid and smooth, with an asphalt rush?

What though less than a century sees

Peace for John Thomas and blades for the trees?

What though the ether sparkles at last,

Lilting the songs and the speeches past?

John Thomas Brewer knows naught of these ills;

John Thomas Brewer knows naught of these goods.

Hooahoooh . . . it's a lonely sound. . . .

John Thomas Brewer is lost in the woods!

BIG JONAS

There was a song,
There was a track
Out where the yuccas shudder black,
Down where the heat waves shadow along,
Down where the water is brack.
Out where the buttes impale the gloom
The barrow creaked—and there was room,
Room for the play of muscled thongs—
For a roaring voice to page its songs.

Yonas Yohnson wheeled and reeled;
Stammered along from Illinois. . . .
(Six feet six, and only a boy)
Red in the husky heart of him—
Red in each timber-studded limb—
Red on a trail of varnished smoke—
Red on an unseen, chafing yoke. . . .
Yonas Yohnson trundled the years—
A barrow beaten and warped and keeled
Was the load that crushed a bony path.
Yonas Yohnson dreamed of ore
In hills where a chorus of steely picks
Clattered and tore!

Up to hell
In a leering sun
Where the riven mountains melt and run;
A wooden, splintery, barefoot track
Bowed to the pain of a pushing back,

A knotted wrist and a knee of wire. . . .
Long-geared, battered, steamed in a fire,
Bound with thong and a bloody tongue—
The barrow rattled the road to gold,
Crushing the pasty oxen dung,
Hidden at night in a valley fold.

His beard trailed smoke
And the ghastly miles
Stumbled behind in a Nordsky song:
Gold in the sky and gold in the creek,
Gold where the starved coyotés squeak,
Yowl and yip through the dirty dawn. . . .
Six feet six . . . he's risen and gone
Into the tight-locked Mormon town,
A giant Scandahoovian clown
Pushing to hell, to hell, to hell!
Shoving a cart to the Golden Gate
Where the ore bruised broken shoes.

And he'll laugh and tell
In his dialect
Of a road that sifted a cloud of cherries,
Of a hot aurora, and miraged fairies,
Of a cliff that boomed like a fire bell,
And a grave by the ford. . . . He will roar and tel
His thick-necked, tow-headed grandchild cubs
Of the rattle and whirl of Comanché clubs. . . .
And a sagebrush couch
In the quivering flame
Of a narrow speedway without a name.

Up in the gray which runs
From dawn,
Pushing a barrow to Ten Mile Camp—
Yonas Yohnson's sweating
And gone. . . .

HETTIE HOOKER

Dave Hooker, he had a good steel plow—
(O Hettie, my heart is aching)
Dave Hooker, he had a strong steel plow—
(But he pointed it not for breaking).

He plowed on the prairie; the prairie chickens flew;
(O Hettie, my heart is yearning)
He plowed on the prairie; the pa'tridges flew,
(The prairie fire is burning).

Hettie Hooker, you'll never be my bride. . . .
(The fire comes singing and roaring)
O Hettie dear, you'll not be my bride. . . .
(Its sparks they are silver and soaring).

You've gone to pick posies, O Hettie dear,
(And Dave never plowed any breaking)
You've gone to pluck roses, O Hettie my own,
(The fire comes nigher and baking).

* * *

Who heard you singing in your charred grave?
(Dave Hooker, go west to the breaking)
Who heard you sing in your lonely grave?
(Dave Hooker a furrow is making).

THE SNOW OF THE OKOBOJI

Now all brave Iowayans listen to me,
I'll tell of a dreadful massacree;
I know that it was long before
I went away to the Civil War. . . .

Inkpaduty is wild and brown:
Up the hills and over and down
He's rode away with a maiden fair
From the snow of the Okoboji!

Oh, it was a cold and mournful night
When the settlers saw a hideous sight—
Those Indian fires against a sky
Coppery-red as the tongues leaped high—

Indian fingers picking at the door,
Indian drums down under the floor,
Indian teeth a-waiting outside—
And Indian feet like a catamount's glide. . . .

I've heard tell how Herriott died:
Seven Sioux corpses lying at his side,
And his brave face set at a frozen grin
With his brains half out and his brains half in;

Doctor Herriott clung like the itch
To his rifle, busted across the breech.
No part of that gun was fit to save. . . .
But his hands still grasp it in his grave!

Inkpaduty is brown and wild;
He's rode away with a red-lipped child.
His teepees smoke on the plains so far
From the snow of the Okoboji!

Gardners, Marbles, Mattocks and more—
Butchered and dragged from their humble door.
Oh, sad those winds on the northern hills
As Inkpaduty's war cry chills.

Inkpaduty's uncle was
The chief Sidominadoty. . . .
He's carried Abbie Gardner away
To the buffalo grass of Dakoty!

All praise for the Pioneer Company
For one of those rescuers was me!
And all this happened long before
I went away to the Civil War.

NEBRASKY IS SO FAR AWAY

Nebrasky is so far away,
Far away
For a sick man to travel alone;
Rachel Bone got a letter one day,
One day
From her husband, the Lieutenant Bone.

"I am sick, I am old,
And the winds they are weary.
The Cheyennes have wounded me
Sorely, my dearie.
O, carry me, carry me
Over the prairie. . . .
Come take me home."

Sweet Rachel, she cried o'er her baby,
Her baby
She took a stage into the west;
And sad were the sand hills. O maybe,
O maybe
Her poor heart was feared in her breast.

"I'm coming to find you,
My husband and soldier:
You'll rest your poor head
In the curve of my shoulder.
I'll carry you, carry you
Over the prairie—
I'll take you home."

At his desolate bedside he found her,
He found her
And the Lieutenant called to the guard:
(His thin, sickly arms were around her,
Around her)
“Let us go, though the journey be hard.”

So they rode and they toiled
Through the wilderness courses,
With a litter swung low
From the harness of horses;
The Cheyennes are galloping
Over the prairie. . .
They're far from home.

In a dugout they waited the arrows,
The arrows
And they stared, as they knew they would die.
The Cheyennes yelled round them like sparrows,
Like sparrows
And slew them, and heard their last cry.

Some wild roses rippled
Long after, long after. . .
And I've heard in the breezes
Their love and their laughter.
The bloody Cheyennes galloped
Over the prairie—
Ne'er took them home.

And what did become of the baby,
The baby
Of sweet Rachel and Lieutenant Bone?
When a man he slew Cheyennes. O maybe,
O maybe
A hundred he hunted alone!

He wept for his parents
The Indians slew there,
And planted the roots
Of the roses that grew there.
He rodé o'er Nebrasky,
Over the prairie. . . .
He never went home.

THIS PALE WHITE ROSE

She watched 'em going
Steadily, silently,
Down through a wilderness of bushy swales,
And sloughs the farmers drained out, later.

She put up her hand
Occasionally, and if
Her thorny finger-tips
Tore at the muddy hair on the legs of the ponies,
Whose business was it but her'n?

Tried to keep,
Tried to hold 'em, she did—
But on they went,
Fading out along the blue ridges
Where the I.C. runs now.
And they always were wrapped
In dusky blankets,
With the smell of wood ashes
And meat grease in 'em.

They blew out t'ward Dakoty
Long time ago—
Yes, and son,
You can go up the field
And find the graves they left behind 'em;
And when the moon
Is wavering up out of the river,
They say you can hear her singing,
And asking 'em to come back.

*But on they went
Up into Dakoty,
With their fretting ponies' feet,
And the smell of sweaty blankets
And flag-root.*

This pale white rose that once was pink—
She seen 'em go.
Son, don't you ever grub out
Them brier bushes.

MILLER ADAM

Miller Adam is gray and thin;
He walks like a lame deer limping.
(But there was a time when his ruddy grin
Studied his courtship primping).

Behind his years the wheat fields stare,
And rivers with black floods flowing—
His is the thought of the meal bags there,
And the thought of the meal piles' growing.

He rode from the east when fields were damp,
When cries of the geese were shriller;
He built his dam by Mesquakies' camp,
And prided himself as a miller.

And times when he treads the roaring street
I can see the brown-red riding
Of an ancient Sioux on a mustang fleet,
His face from the wild sun hiding;

And times when he stares by the window-pane
I can hear the spring storm rushing—
Dammed in the swirl of a battered rain
As the stones go grating, crushing. . . .

*Oh, Adam, some have a panelled room
With their velvet and bright lace sunning—
You faced the howl of a midnight flume
While a vicious sea was running!*

*Wherever you limp with your sad old cane,
And the snow on your bent back falling,
Your pride is one with forgotten grain,
And the early, keen brant calling.*

LYMAN DILLON AND HIS PLOW

"...and directed an individual named Lyman Dillon, to plow a furrow from Dubuque to Iowa City...as a guide for surveyors who would open this new territory with a military road."

Lyman Dillon is plowing tonight,
And he bends
Far out into the ridgy silence
Where the known world ends;
Far out into the weary wash
Of broken winds, he goes plowing
A long, black furrow—
Over the hill, past the thicket
Or the burrow of foxes or wolves.
The prairie is bowing before the sight
Of Lyman Dillon.

Thin hands that never felt the air
Since they were buried there
Before the Civil War,
Are parting the sod in front of the plow:
Like ghostly knives, they cut.
They have been reaping
For their God until now....
Someone else is weeping—but
Dillon goes on ahead
Cleaving the prairie, instead,
On to the place where the dark river shows.

No one can ever tell
What wheat was sown in the country
Where the old highway runs
Down to Iowa City. . . .
There were crops in the ground
Which Dillon turned up with his plow:
With never a sound or a shadow of pity
He turned them up and under,
While his bright blade slit the meadow asunder.

Forms as light as the wet stars
That stare above, are running
Ahead of the plow, and there is the brush
Of feathers and jingle of metal—
And the sweet hush of a bruised-petal
Turned toward the velvet sky.
Things that live on the long ridges
Are waiting at all the crossings,
At all the bridges;
People who dwell on a farm just beyond,
Sleep through the night,
And no harm can come to them.

They slumber silently,
Not knowing a plowshare will pass
Through the grass of their fields—
Or that red men run swiftly
Down to Anamosa, and leathery feet
Beat and beat on the primary road.

What of the hates they had,
And the hearts that were sad,
And the joys which were bursting?
Forgotten, they are—and people lie
Sleeping, sleeping and never thirsting.

High

Out on a road that was made for the soldiers,
Lyman Dillon goes plowing.
With a sway of his shoulders
And shadowy hips. . . .
The wind sings above, and the breath
Of its unnoticed lips
Is sighing and soughing.



III

IN GRAVES THEY LIE



LOVELY LOUISE

*With a devil-dashed broncho between her knees
... O, didn't you see our lovely Louise?*

Louise was the string of a Montana bow. . . .
And she saddled her horse for the big rodeo;
With her hair in the sky, with her hair in the wind,
She headed her horse where the corral gates grinned.
I've heard her "Hoo-ee" in the sob of the trees—
O, didn't you see our lovely Louise?

*She felt fire pitching from under her knees,
And never pulled leather, our lovely Louise.*

No woman could ride like Louise in the dawn:
The coyotes they watched her, but now they are gone. . . .
No round-up had known the red slash of her quirt—
(The tenderfeet wept when they saw she was hurt,
But little cared she for the pity of these—
She came from Montana—our lovely Louise)!

*Her hoofs by the butte and her cry in the breeze;
The moon saw her riding, O lovely Louise.*

"Good-by to Ole Paint and Good-by to Montan'—"
You'll believe that she laughed with the laugh of a man!
O that wicked Keno, his eyes they are white,
And he trampled our lovely one there in our sight.
I've sung her a dirge. And no one ever sees
The dust of her riding, the smile of Louise.

*High clouds, they are broncs, and she'll ride all of these,
Back home to Montana, O lovely Louise!*

THE BALLAD OF ALFRED MONTGOMERY

Nothing but corn to dry his brush. . . .
He lashed his paint with a drunken rush:
"I'll sop your souls in its golden meal,
I'll make you drivel and cry and kneel!
Get to your knees!"
His eye was mad—
And winds whooped over the rattling rows.

Palette in hand, Montgomery goes
Down the aisle in a spectral walk:
"I'll splash your eyes with an amber stalk,
And powder the tassels in your hair."

*Canvas is ready and paint is nigh,
Swab the brushes across the sky!
Deep in the gloom of a yokel's heart
The wettened and oily tendrils dart.*

They beat their tom-toms, the prairie Sioux,
And rode in a dirty, loping queue
Over the meadow and into the morn:
All they sang was a song of corn. . . .
The critics sighed and the critics scoffed
In far salons—but the red men doffed
Their bloody bonnets, and danced in the dusk
By a fire of glowing corn-cob musk.

*And every kernel and crest and blade
Smoked in the singing moonlight shade.
Out of the west the artist came;
Out of the west rose many a name.*

*And God scorched slopes with a laughing sun
West of the Wapsipinicon.*

Corn in the clouds? It's there . . .
And the man
Paints where the Sioux went down to die,
Paints where the badgers have their holes,
Paints where the mirrored wagons lie.
Old Mondamin drums and frowns
Over an age of torturing towns—
And only the weary critics scorn
The golden fodder,
The frosty corn.

FLOYD COLLINS' CAVE

(Written as the ancient song-ballads of
Kentucky were written)

Oh, they say he is buried as deep as can be,
And the shovels thud down on the oily clay:
Oh, Floyd Collins slid to a hole in the hill,
And he's buried thar fur from the gold of the day.

And thar's moaning—a moaning
Back in the cave,
Floyd Collins' cavern is Floyd Collins' grave!

Floyd ruther crawl to the gateway of hell
Than work with his Pa who loved him so well—
Down in the earth thar was fairies and elves,
And they tole him secrets that he wouldn't tell. . . .
What's jest beyond, in the turn of the slide—
Thar in the damp whar the cave crickets hide?
Less' go and see, Floyd, less' go and see—
And they left him to sleep in the tomb whar he died.

And thar's moaning—a moaning
Back in the cave,
Floyd Collins' palace is Floyd Collins' grave!

Yay! And he found it—a silver lit hall
Further than Ejjypt and under a wall;
Big di'mond bowlders that dripped with gold,
Fox-fire torches and that wasn't all. . . .
Nobody ever saw Floyd's cave afore,
Nobody crawls in the hole anymore;
Floyd in his deep palace rules thar alone—
Floyd in his last sleep guards the one door. . . .

BOB THE GRADER

He was a ragged driver
With blacksnakes in his boots;
He drove a span of wicked mules,
Crazier than coots.
I've felt his lash a-stinging
Across my angry cheek. . . .

*Ghosts of gray mules fighting
By the muddy creek.*

Old Bob the grading colonel
Had hands to choke you in;
His eyes, they stared infernal,
And his beard was tin.
He dumped a thousand ton of dirt
In that fill:

*Ghosts of gray mules stamping
On the dusky hill.*

They said the roads he graded
All ended up in hell. . . .
(Why he stared so horribly
None of us could tell)
His teams, they always hated him,
And a big jack finally

*Flattened out his head for him,
Against a tree.*

Go, bring the rusty harness
And drag the scraper down;
We saw the tracks of many mules
Up along that crown!
O, grease the bits with tallow
So they will not hurt

*As the teams go toiling
Through the dirt.*

GRANNY

SARAH BREWER BONEBRIGHT,
Webster City, Iowa.
1837-1930

Carry her out to the hillside, and fold her calloused hands,
And drag for her the boulder that rests upon her lands—
A boulder torn from the river. Her tall son dug it out
From its cold, brown bed by the sand-bar and the old elk's
buried snout.

The bones of buffalo knew it; her bones will know it now.
May it shield her sleeping body as it shielded the bull and
the cow.
And let the women who knew her tell their babes in the
shade:
"This boulder touches a Woman. This is her accolade."

And when the cottonwoods quiver, in breath of a dark spring
night,
And the dome of the courthouse trembles, alone with its
little light—
Up from the creek of her father, the Dead will rise and walk:
Wilson and Roll and Billy, to sit beside her and talk.

They'll lean their guns in the maples, they'll stamp on the
dark, dead ground;
And Granny will rise and curtsey, to know that she has been
found.
They'll tell of a hundred antlers, and whisper of waiting
Sioux. . . .
And she'll be ready to feed them before their telling is
through.

Pasque-flower sky . . . they are going. Into the meadow they
tramp,
Down to the brook of the Brewers, down where the willows
are damp;
And only the dew will witness the tracks in a wet green chill,
Where the lean men beckoned to Granny, and Granny
watched from her hill.

Brassfield and Bell, they have faded. Bonebright echoed
away.
The wolves have run from the briars, the prairie has turned
to hay. . . .
And I cry to think of an hour, in the crush of an aching
dawn,
When I'll go back to that cabin—with the last of the Brewers
gone.

REDFERN

Have you heard the ballad of Redfern
Who flew to the back-beyond?
(A jaguar's only a kitten;
An ocean's only a pond).
Have you heard his parrots a-thunder,
His orchids bursting the sky?
He sped to the python pillars,
And nobody saw him die. .

And nobody heard him shooting,
And nobody heard him fall
Deep—oh deep in the marshes,
Down by the jungle pall;
He set straight into the midnight,
He rode like a hunter's god
To find the smithy of demons
Where all the devils are shod.

*The vines grow out of his cockpit;
Lianas twist at his wheels—
But out he cuts with a saber,
To trust to his silver heels.
Out—oh out to the pampas,
Ever and ever he goes. . . .
The blow-guns wait by the bayous,
The bee-birds follow in rows.*

He will tell, whenever you see him,
Of all of the witches' eyes
That watched from the weltered greenness,
As far as the condor flies.
He will tell, wherever you find him,
Of drums that pounded the sun,
Of trails that beckoned before him. . . .
And he is the only one!

Out of the pithy armies
Who hiked when the stars were white,
Only his compass steadied
And only his trail was right.
He heeded coppery voices
(Ever his wings were donned)
Growling the lure that drew him
Into the back-beyond!

THE RECORD OF CAPTAIN GRAY

One cloud came down across the court
And shadowed all the pickets;
One bubble swelled within the fort,
And airmen crept like crickets.

(For there is not a roof above
But has another, higher. . . .
Beyond the reach of mortal love
All ether waits the flyer).

Then booming up into the air
Across the field and stables,
A man waved from the wicker there
And rid himself of cables;

A man went spinning with a bag
That shook itself a-shudder—
A ball of canvas set a-sag
To romp without a rudder!

(For none had ever crept aloft
And touched the cobalt ceiling. . . .
The eagles wavered wings, and coughed;
The stars went hissing, reeling).

Men watched him from a city street,
Men lifted lenses, glasses:
"The sun is wide, a copper heat,
To burn him when he passes!"

Men watched him from a field of corn.
They echoed up their chiding:
"No one of us was ever born
To die in such a riding!"

He heard them through the bitter sky;
His ears were windy, calloused.
And only comets melting by
Knew when he threw his ballast.

(For none can swim the Milky Way
But he must pay a rental,
And man is small, above the day—
No bigger than a lentil).

The gods who guard the atmosphere
Raised eyebrows at his notion:
"He thinks to touch our hemisphere,
He thinks to taste our ocean?"

They marvelled at his naughty nerve:
No sense of spark or gasket.
No motor revs, but only curve
And quiver of a basket.

The air was empty amethyst
But, ah, the wind was rushing!
And planet steel had chained his wrist,
And weight of worlds was crushing . . .

The gods who polish meteors
Put paws against the cordage—
They tore the valves of gassy doors,
And scattered out his hoardage.

(But he had swung beyond the roof,
And seen the earth go spinning
Beneath the path of comet's hoof,
Beneath the thunder's dinning).

* * *

A crumpled skin in Tennessee
Was caught amid some branches;
The chant of death went eerily
Across the cotton ranches.

(But if the taunting Pleiades
Are high, his mark was higher!
One arrow in the blazing seas
Was not afraid of fire).

And if the race of Mars is fast,
The race of Gray was fleeter;
The brand he burned in air was cast
Upon his altimeter.

I land-lubber lout,
 I never knew the sea.
Hard-a-port and *stern-about*
 Are strange words to me;
 But I saw old Davy
 Jones in his locker
 (A wet-beard mocker
 Hunting his navy)—

*They came from the strong-box of Davy Jones
 As green as the salt in their boyish bones!*

I never knew whether
 The east coast weather
 Froze them stiff in the guttering sea
 (*Starboard* and *port* are odd to me);
 But I saw old Davy,
 Davy Jones—
 In the gold-buttoned coat
 Of the Gulf Stream navy,
 Up to his knees in the thin gray gravy—
 Like foggy old fluttered
 Mother Hubbard,
 Hunting his haunts in his rusty cupboard:

*And there's many another sailorman
 Slept with the fish since the tides began!*

They're gone
From the locker of Davy Jones,
In the navy's smoke
And the navy's groans,
As the steel-sweat ships wail high, wail low,
And it's over an iron reef they go—
Where the good gobs swam out, dead but free,
(I saw them . . . though I never knew the sea)
With a cigarette sneer
In their weed-young tones:

*"Aw, go to hell
With your Davy Jones!"*

THE SHEIK

I

First, there was Julio—
Dancing dusty fandangos
In the guitar-rung saloon—
Elusive tangos tripped by the billowy legs
Of a slick, black sprite with a whip for a smile.
They started dancing 'em
In cabarets from Wilkes-Barre to Long Beach;
In Wilmington, Clio and Ida Grove
Boys began twirling. . . .

*Four Horsemen,
Grim in the powdered dust
Of hidden centuries—wheeling thick swords
And always grinning. . . .*

2

The silky Frenchman made old maids weep.
They sighed and gurgled like passionate
Old hollyhocks. Women who had loved
Country realtors, section hands, physicians—
And seen them marry other girls
Free of hair lips or squirrel teeth—
Well, he was their petted god,
All in bright silk and powdered fluffs. . .
And maybe he thought their futile tears
Sweeter than the thunder
Of two hundred million hands.

*Somehow, he was greasy,
But I never thought of a serpent.
"Pardon, mam'selle," and "Toujours" and "Oui"—
He filmed better, shaping those words.*

3

He will always be a rider over brown deserts
To most of us.
(They hurled the name "Sheik" on bandied lips
At every yearning, oil-haired youth
From Middletown to Seattle)
Hunter on a windy horse—burnoosed—
Singing about the Shalimar,
And blinking his eyes, under Kliegs,
In the balcony scene.
We wondered where was the Shalimar,
And if any Arabs still loped in lusty clouds
Past oases. . . .

*Of course every one knew
It was only a picture.
But after that there were desert drums
Going in our ears, whenever we saw him.*

4

John Bunny would be standing
Within the tented door—
Wally Reid at the wheel of a fuming car—
And Barbara La Marr with her soft eyes

Under the scented canopy. . . .
(Fancy—John Bunny as an Arab butler!
But whoever thought that Hollywood
Could cry like a hungry child. . . ?)

Snip-snap—and “Camera!”
School girls—thin bosomed—
“A guy like that—oh, Sadie. . . .”
Fade to the uttermost Sahara,
O desert horses, pounding
Over dim sands, forever and ever!

WHEN THE ANGELS CAME FOR BRYAN

When the angels came for Bryan
They were happier than deer,
Deer running wild in the dawn of Galilee;
While up in the mountains, God looked out
And summoned His doormen—one, two, three.
(Residential saints could never scorn
An errand at evening or at a morn,
Or at calm of a Tennessee afternoon)
A herald band playing an old hymn tune
Was the rush and the rhythm
And fierce coach of fire,
Which bore Billy Bryan to his long desire.

Job and his troubles faded away. . . .
“They’re bringing Bryan in at the door!”
Ancient Democrats frenzied their harps,
And cast rich blooms on the cobalt floor;
Hebrew women cried with gongs,
In through the welter of haloed throngs;
And one high ladder led up from hell,
That even the scorched scientists might see.

*Far on the glint of Philistine spears
The sacred, ponderous army appears. . . .
Wail, oh David, wail and sing—
Gaze at the man whom the angels bring!
God’s rough beard gilds the palace with flame
And many million pigeons are rocketing
Over the bastions of highest fame,
And the white-hot trumpets are racketing!*

Deer in the cool of a Galilee night,
Shepherds (and wise men, blind to the light)
Pour to the casements, and smile and wave
At the bold newcomer. Never a slave
Crept from the torrent of Babylon,
Swam the rich flood of the Perished Sea,
Or swarmed an eternal ladder, but gave
A feather from his wing as paid admission
To watch the little lambkins kiss the lion,
And Saint Peter open the door for Bryan!

CLARE BRIGGS

Jim Riley opened up the door:
"Come in," he said. "We're on the floor,
Sprawling in any warm direction,
Looking at Skinnay's stamp collection."

And Gene Field nodded in a nap;
The little boys sat on his lap.
One, with the hair where sunshine lingers,
Slept with a sling-shot in his fingers.

Outside a black storm whined its breath,
But inside rested happy death;
And Briggs smiled at the homely vapor,
Then sat him down with pens and paper.

And Riley tiptoed up to see
The glory of his artistry:
"After you're done, we'll play outside.
It's Sammy Clemens' turn to hide."

No shadow dwelt beside that hearth
For it was brighter than on earth.
A ghost . . . a boy . . . and Briggs to draw him.
We smiled, when we looked up and saw him.

CHICAGO LANDLORD

For Pop Norris

Feet may come in the midnight, feet in the hurricane;
Once when the door is bolted they'll never get in again.
Whether the Black Maria sirens to Sunnyside—
They will never be knowing. No one would let them ride.

Feet may dig from Diversey, feet may clatter from Clark,
Helling over the precinct where he went out in the dark.
"Lodging, lodging—" the voices wail—"Seven dollars a
week?"
There is never an answer, never a keyhole creak.

I rambled along Diversey, and never spotted a saint;
Only the smell of the taxis, only the floosies' paint.
They said that a graying landlord had shuffled on in the
gloom. . . .
I went over to Broadway, but never found me a room.

Out by the lake I slumbered, wherever the grass was soft,
With *Tribunes* under my buttocks, and stars as my empty
loft.
But I swear that I saw the gray one (forgetting the buzzer's
bark)
Lending a lion money, and selling rooms in the park.

THE SWEDE ARTILLERY

(As German prisoners came back, they begged to see the "Seventy-five Machine Guns" worked by the Minnesota brigade.)

This is ever Sweden! Though the guns are gone away,
Ruttet over many years to make their final bay.
This is Minnesota wheat (though you would think it
France)—
Ole, Jan and Peterson came up for the advance:

*Blue and gold, the glimmer as they cursed their tired hikings.
Placements fed for St. Mihiel? No, a tomb for vikings.*

Their's the endless pressing of a muscle on a bone—
Their's the sour chemistry of glycerine and stone—
Tawny-bearded, tow of head, and thick of brutish neck,
(Rural, broken murmurs at the bluff and bitter wreck.)

*Jan has passed a hundred rounds within the paws of Ole;
Peterson has wandered West . . . is Minnesota holy?*

Helmet heads came down the line with bayonets behind,
Gasping German wonder as they passed the leafy blind.
These were squat machine guns with a bore of Seven Five. . .
How could human sinews sweat to melt them down alive?

*Batter, pound against a line across the foggy kilos:
Warm the Minnesota wheat, in sunny summer billows.*

Night may never come again but grimy gunners walk.
Guarded well by Norse and Dane, artillery will hawk
In a caisson-clattered haste across the low canal
Where the battery has left its heavy, sweetened pall.

*Ole, Jan and Peterson have made the harvest mellow;
Their's were hearts of mighty brass, and only hair was
yellow!*

FOR A FIFTEEN-YEAR-OLD

(K.L.)

He in a box . . . and the wind riding high?
No—oh never was he one to die!
Young as a thistle-leaf, thin as a leopard,
His are the herds which the warm clouds shepherd. . . .

I saw a mustang streaking through the sky.
He in a box? He never came to die.

What are these tracks where the wild deer run?
Some lean hunter with some brown gun,
Followed the trail while a hot day weltered
Over a canyon the stone hills sheltered.

I saw a wingéd colt learning how to fly:
He in a box? He never came to die.

All of you tell me the smooth wheels roll
Out to that plain with its deep, square hole.
Hark . . . how the night-hawks scream in their chases,
High in the dusk past those platted-out places. . . .

I saw a pinto where the ranges lie—
Never in a box, never come to die.

CHANT IN THE COUNTY BUILDING

(November 16, 1926)

Still the cars debauch outside, and heavy swings the door,
(This was foggy granite from a green and foggy shore)
We have walked in Valley mud, and bought a purple tie
In the din of Maxwell Street where ragged markets lie;
We have yelled our summons at a brown and beery bar—
We have seen Chicago. And we cheer for Paddy Carr!

We who walk on Clark Street when our angels swim our sky,
We are only drunken elves who watch our gods go by. . . .
Tony Cermak on the fifth, with Sunny Sonnenschein,
These are bitter names, and strong, and potent more than
wine!

Lift your eyes against the chimneys builded to a star—
Write your book on County Cook, and cheer for Paddy
Carr!

(Black and sleek as river tides, or white as Drive hotels)
In the halls the voters veer, their steps a-chime like bells,
Crusted with a stockyard smoke—or smooth as girls who play
Devil-slick in satin at a haunted cabaret!
Up from Cicero they troop, or down from Maywood far,
Weighted heavy with their horns to blow for Paddy Carr.

Still the window-glasses glint: they never heed the years.
(All the little devil-folk are ankle deep in tears)
Bath-house Johnny dresses yet in checkered linen fine—
Sweitzer, Cermak, Ryan all may march—a gleaming line—
We would cheer them. . . . But today our heavy hearts are
char.
We have seen Chicago. . . . And we weep for Paddy Carr.

HOUDINI

Up from the dull green water,
A chain slid from his hand—
He rose as a grinning goblin:
We could not understand!

The ball was big as a boulder,
The shackle hammered steel. . . .
He shook them free in the ocean,
And swam up like a seal.

And every woman whispered;
The men swore hardily:
His coffin was gaping, empty—
Down, down in the sea!

*They may swathe his body with satin
And hollow an eerie cave,
And hinge his casket with iron,
Down, down in the grave. . . .*

We stare from the crowded cavern
With hissing lights in our eyes;
Only a coffin and shackles—
He will surely rise!

*Hours we wonder and whisper:
No wave of an elfish hand,
No rattle of fetters fallen.
We . . . cannot understand. . . .*

UNCLE JAS BELL

He rode the sorrel, evening flanks
Of fleeting clouds.
(I always think his bold halloo
Will bugle in, when autumn smoke is brown)
Oh, up and down the hills
He strode with dogs, and crowds
Of yelling, wire men like him.

(He always walks the winds
On nights like this,
And blanket shapes on straying ponies
Keep him company)
Two collie dogs, a pound of shag,
A rifle, and an oily pipe,
And silver poplar leaves he loved:
A narrow, crazy-quilted bed for later years. . . .
These fragment things are always part of him,
When autumn fires sear the plain,
And squirrels by prairie rivers
Chant, *Kow-kow*,
Beneath the burnished sun.



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